

RELIQUARIES

THE REMEMBERED SELF

RITHIKA MERCHANT | SURUCHI CHOKSI

TEXT BY ARSHIA SATTAR

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TARQ

Produced by
TARQ

Designed and printed by

spenta multimedia

IDEATE | CREATE | PUBLISH
www.spentamultimedia.com

ISBN No: xxx-xx-xxxxx-xx-x

INTRODUCTION

The team at TARQ is thrilled to present an exhibition of recent works by Suruchi Choksi and Rithika Merchant. "RELIQUARIES: The Remembered Self" takes a closer look at how we construct and envision our pasts, both collective and personal.

In Suruchi's photographs, printed on aluminum, as well as in her six-channel video installation, she toys with the idea of photographs being a conductor in the orchestration of our own personal memory. Her distressed and distorted personal photographs tell a story that has evolved over time, both physically and emotionally. She delves into each layer of the image, assuming that no picture, and no story, is absolute at any given time, for it is seen through filters that every individual carries in their mind's eyes.

Rithika's characters hark back to a sense of belief in ritual, with each intricate watercolour building a mystical narrative from one image to the next. An inherent feminism exists in her decoration undermining the minimalism of modernity that views a woman just as a muse. Her use of cut out; almost puzzle-like pieces effortlessly permits us to piece together a narrative, using some of our own magical thinking.

Through their respective processes both artists are able to uniquely capture two aspects of recollecting that are radically different, yet inextricably linked to each other.

Hena Kapadia
Gallery Director, TARQ

THE REMEMBERED SELF

How do we dream? In clusters of images, apparently. A dream is made when we put those images into a sequence, when we make a story out of them. A dream becomes real when we tell it, not when we see it. When we add one dream to another, the collection of dreams becomes who we are. Whom and what do we see in our dreams? People and places we know, people and places that we have never seen before. Are these fragments of other lives already lived? Or, of lives that are yet to come? Are they glimpses into the lives of others? Dreams become memories at some point; that is in their nature. They are ephemeral; they pass in the night. They are the shimmering, diaphanous substance that we weave into memories in the half-light of the morning, in the half-light of our awakening.

How do we remember? Mostly in images, triggered by other images, by smells, by places, by people, by things. The locus of memory is hardly important; it matters not whether it resides in the heart or in the mind, in the soul or in the brain, in a physiological organ or in a psychological space. What matters is that memory resides: it occupies, it settles, it lives, it is in the present even though it is of the past. There cannot be a self without memory; we are made of what we choose to remember, of how we choose to string those memories into a story, like pearls in a necklace, like flowers in a garland, the whole always being greater than the sum of its parts. A memory does not stand alone, it appears always in a constellation, as part of a galaxy of brighter and darker spaces, each cradling the other, each giving the other meaning.

What we remember makes us who we are. We add to our own self by remembering what is not ours to begin with, we remember people and things from other times and from other places, from others lives. We pick daisies from other fields for the chain with which we adorn ourselves.



Rithika Merchant
Hildegard von Bingen
Gouache & Ink on Paper
23.7 x 17.8 in
2014



Rithika Merchant
Doppelgänger
Gouache & Ink on Paper
21.7 x 17.8 in
2014



Suruchi Choksi
Memory Trace #11
Digital Print on Aluminium
In an edition 5 + 1 A/P
2014



Suruchi Choksi
A Walk in the Forest
Mixed Media Installation
Installation Dimensions Variable
2015



Suruchi Choksi
Memory Trace #27
Digital Print on Archival Paper
In an edition 5 + 1 A/P
2014



Rithika Merchant
Exquisite Corpse I (Chimera)
Gouache & Ink on Paper
23.7 x 19.7 in
2014

How do we make myth? A dream, a memory, belongs to one person; a myth is for those around us, the ones with whom we live. If a memory is private, a myth is public, if a memory is personal, a myth is social, if a memory is unique, a myth is shared. Within every myth lies a memory and behind every memory lies a dream. As we move from a dream to a myth, as we embrace what lies beyond us, we become less individual but more ourselves. Through myth, we acknowledge that we participate in a series of other images, in a story that we all helped create, a necklace of pearls longer than our own, a garland of flowers coloured differently from those in our garden, a constellation with more stars than we can see. As dreams and memories make a unique person, so myths become a space where individuals mingle their selves in shared memories and experiences. Rituals are the gestures by which we sketch the boundaries of what we share, by which we draw a circle around our remembering.

What are the ways in which we honour what we remember, celebrate both myth and memory, revere the personal and the public? Often, we tell stories. But they vanish into the air once they are told. Sometimes, we build reliquaries, things of beauty both inside and out, holding a memory within even as they radiate a meaning without. A reliquary's contents are as much emotional as they are physical.

A reliquary might contain physical memories of another person, another life, sometimes a life that has been lived far away in time and space from ours. By honouring the reliquary and its contents, by making that other life, that other person ours, we engender meaning. Another life joins ours, it becomes entwined in our story, it gets told in our myths, because a reliquary participates in both memory and myth.

How do we create coherence from these diverse stories, how do we present the self that we are, a self that is both private and public? How do our little pearls, our small flowers, our shining stars, live in the larger necklace, the garland, the galaxy, the reliquary? We live in layers, palimpsests that re-present our selves to the world.



Rithika Merchant
 Tools of Sympathetic Magic (clockwise
 from top left Ring, Amulet, Mask, Effigy)
 Gouache & Ink on Paper
 19.7 x 13.8 in
 2014



Suruchi Choksi
 Memory Trace #01
 Digital Print on Archival Paper
 In an edition 5 + 1 A/P
 2014



Suruchi Choksi
Memory Trace #09
Digital Print on Aluminium
In an edition 5 + 1 A/P
2014



Rithika Merchant
The Creative Sacrifice
Gouache & Ink on Paper
27.6 x 39.3 in
2011



Rithika Merchant
Twins
Gouache & Ink on Paper
19.7 x 19.7 in
2014



Rithika Merchant
Doctrine Of Signature
Gouache & Ink on Paper
25.6 x 27 in
2013

when a sadness ineffable falls
suddenly like a shadow over the heart
-- even while one is wrapped in happiness --
the mind thrills, spontaneous, unknown to itself,
to an intimation from the past
quickened by some fleeting loveliness
or, haunting sounds of exquisite music heard:
lasting impressions of love's remembrance
live on in us from former lives, perhaps,
clinging like fragrance to our migrant soul

from Chandra Rajan's translation of Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* in
Kalidasa: The Loom of Time, (Penguin Books, New Delhi: 1989), pp. 232-33

Are dreams and myths limited by the extent of our imaginations? Perhaps not. Perhaps it is in dreams and myths that the imagination breaks its bounds, in these infinite spaces where there are no limits. The images we create to share what lies within us reveal what we perceive with the eye of the mind and the eye of the heart. New images persuade us to see the world around us differently: the physiological eye is led forward and challenged by the psychological eye, it is seduced into reaching for what lies beyond the surface. Forms merge and morph, metaphor is realised in a person, an animal, an object, a shade, a hue, a texture.

As dreams and myths remind us that there is always more than our waking lives, that there is always a behind and a beyond, a frame serves only to remind us of all that surrounds an image. Within, too, other images seep through what we see at first, other thoughts make their presence felt, other ideas emerge, nascent. We are in the realm of possibility, potential, implausibility, immensity. Definitions dissolve, boundaries blur, frontiers fade. When we surrender to the imagination, we are free to believe.



Suruchi Choksi
Memory Trace #16
Digital Print on Aluminium
In an edition 5 + 1 A/P
2014



Suruchi Choksi
Memory Trace #15
Digital Print on Aluminium
In an edition 5 + 1 A/P
2014



Rithika Merchant
Bathsheba
Embroidery Hoop with
Gouache & Ink on Paper
7.9 x 7.9 in
2014



Rithika Merchant
Mauna Loa (Fire)
Embroidery Hoop with
Gouache & Ink on Paper
8.7 x 8.7 in
2014



Rithika Merchant
Nang Tani (Earth)
Embroidery Hoop with
Gouache & Ink on Paper
13 x 13 in
2014



Suruchi Choksi
Memory Trace #10
Digital Print on Aluminium
In an edition 5 + 1 A/P
2014



Suruchi Choksi
Memory Trace #14
Digital Print on Aluminium
In an edition 5 + 1 A/P
2014



Suruchi Choksi
Memory Trace #43
Digital Print on Paper
In an edition 5 + 1 A/P
2015

RITHIKA MERCHANT

In this series of work I explore superstition, ritual and myth. In the history of humankind these three concepts and their manifestations have given an explanation for natural phenomena, the effect of nature on humanity. It has also been a part of our evolution and cosmogony.

In the present day and for the foreseeable future, science gives us a complete explanation for most things. However, it places humans as part of a greater scheme rather than the centre of our own narrative. As much as science gives a more accurate description of humanity it takes away the spiritual power given to every human to understand their own destiny. This series of work aims to bring humanity back to the centre of concern. As an artist I am interested in examining and creating a link between humans and their past.

Other ideas explored are those to do with the gap between what we know and feel and what we see and how we reconcile the two. For example ghosts and gods can be viewed as a concept brought forth by humans to bridge this gap. To quote Andi Zeisler's essay "The Feminist Power of Female Ghosts" - *"Ghost stories are often profeminist tales of women who, if only in death, subvert the assumptions and traditions of women as dutiful wives and mothers, worshipful girlfriends, or obedient children by unleashing a lifetime's worth of rage and retribution. In the feminist horror zine Ax Wound, Collen Wanglund theorizes that the Asian female ghost is an inherently feminist figure whose very presence is a symbol of how deeply men fear female power. Their vengeance isn't necessarily aimed at the person who wronged them, and as such it's as unthinking and randomly destructive as systems of patriarchy."*

One way to connect humans and nature is to look for analogy and relationships, be it in shapes, purpose, and power. For humans to master nature and their destiny we create concepts and objects that will provide or hold power. Now that we live in a time of perceived prosperity we can look back and distill the meanings from stories we have told and created.

SURUCHI CHOKSI

But then, what is your myth - the myth in which you do live?

-Jung

My quest to understand absolute reality and the desire to comprehend why we are often in disagreement with others led me to the realization that the very notion of 'absolute truth' is a myth. Even in the presence of records to prove the veracity of events, the story is really only just a version, informed by our personal history, politics, biases and obsessions. A haphazard amalgam of biology and culture, with a good dose the sub-conscious thrown in.

Memorable human experiences do on a personal level, what cultural myths have historically performed for entire societies. Known or unbeknownst to us, each of us has our individual myths that drive us. It is not through experience alone that we become who we are, but through the creative act of storytelling that we glean a sense of meaning, identity, and power from our past experience. The crafting of a personal myth is an interpretive and intuitive operation, drawing from a highly selective and reorganized version of the past.

Photographs are myth-making tools, informing and perpetuating personal mythologies. Images have the power to bring to mind stories, legends, and tales of the individuals portrayed.. Their meaning is never static or absolute at any given time, and their colors are perceived by the viewer's relationship to the image and the people, places, and events depicted in it. A picture has many layers, and not all are revealed to the viewer at the same instance, seen as they are through filters that every individual carries in their mind's eyes.

As record-keepers, these pictures must work in both directions—

What they say about me, and what their function is in terms of the viewer and their experience. The more impressionistic they are, the more the eye tries to connect them to reality- they are photographs after all, not paintings. If it looks real, it is perceived as real.

The brain then starts to associate - and the cogs in the wheels of the story-making machine are set in motion.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Rithika Merchant deals with creating mosaics of myths that question received histories that are available to us throughout culture.

In 2008, she graduated with a Bachelors in Fine Arts from Parsons the New School for Design in New York. She has studied painting and conceptual practice at the Hellenic International Studies In The Arts in Paros, Greece. In 2008 she was a resident at the Convento Sao Francisco Mertola in Mertola, Portugal.

Her recent projects include an international residency where she researched the folk culture of the native German speaking Swabians in Garana a village in a Banaat region of Romania as a part of Arthouse Wolfberg/Garana where she was commissioned for a triptych for the regional art museum. She was a participant at the Swab Art Far in Barcelona. She has had two solo showings at Gallery Art and Soul, Bombay - "Origin of Species" in 2011, followed by "Mythography" in 2013.

In 2014, she had a solo show "Encyclopaedia of the Strange" in Nuremberg, Germany. Her work was also included in multiple group shows at Stephen Romano Gallery in New York. She is currently preparing for her debut solo show in New York at Stephen Romano Gallery.

Born in Bombay she now divides her time between Bombay and Barcelona.

Suruchi Choksi is a self-taught artist. Having grown up in Kolkata and working presently out of Mumbai, she grapples with the issues of space, limits, absence and elsewhere. Her repertoire includes photography, drawings, sculptures and installations.

Her work is abstract, and by contesting the division between the realms of memory and the realm of experience she makes works that are intensely personal. She tries to absorb the tradition of archiving into daily practice and uses her art as a register of wordless narratives, working within an ambiguous space.

She has had two solo shows, Burnt Sienna in 2006 at Hacienda Art Gallery, Mumbai and a video installation, Unbelong : Illustrated Antipodes at Afghan Church and What About Art?, Mumbai in 2014.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arshia Sattar is a Bangalore-based translator, teacher and writer. She has a PhD from the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago and her areas of interest span Indian mythology and the story traditions of the subcontinent. As a translator, her body of work comprises translations from Sanskrit of tales from the Kathasaritasagara and Valmiki's Ramayana.

She is the author of a book of essays on the Ramayana, titled Lost Loves: Exploring Rama's Anguish, and another prolific work of non-fiction – The Mouse Merchant: Money in Ancient India. She has also penned three books for children – Kishkindha Tails, Pampa Sutra, and Adventures with Hanuman.

She is the co-founder of the Sangam House International Residency Program, located outside Bangalore. Sattar has been writing about and reviewing books for several Indian publications for the last 25 years and also teaches classical Indian literature at various academic institutions in India and abroad.

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12TH MARCH 2015 – 10TH APRIL 2015

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